

PREFACE

Sage-grouse are a species of concern across much of their range, especially peripheral populations. Sage-grouse across Canada have declined 66 to 92% in abundance from 1970 population levels (Aldridge and Brigham 2003), with no sign of recovery in recent years. Alberta agreed with these estimates placing their sage-grouse declines at 80% over the same time period (Connelly et al. 2004). Historic sage-grouse declines are primarily attributed to habitat alteration and degradation (Schroeder et al. 2004). Other pressures such as energy and transportation infrastructure development are incrementally mounting, and degrading the suitability of remaining habitat in Alberta. Currently, subpopulations in both Alberta and Saskatchewan may have been reduced to below minimum viable size (Lungle and Pruss 2008).

Currently, Montana considers sage-grouse as both a Species of Concern and an upland game bird having stable populations. Undoubtedly, high densities of sage-grouse across Montana have provided a valid reason precluding listing, including the presence of at least two of North America's population strongholds (Connelly et al. 2004). One of these includes a high-density subpopulation between the Missouri River and the Milk River in Northern Montana.

The critical status of the silver sagebrush-associated sage-grouse populations warrants special attention by governments in the transboundary region of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Montana. All options available for recovery of the species are being considered. In particular, Alberta is seeking immediate efforts to ensure stochastic events and lag effects from past development (Holloran 2005) do not cause extirpation of sub-populations in the near term. In the longer term, population recovery will require a suite of actions and evaluations to determine success.

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (ASRD), a ministry within the provincial government, has approached Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) with a proposal to translocate up to 40 sage-grouse in year 1 from North Central Montana Region 6 to Southeast Alberta for the purpose of population augmentation. The proposal further requests to translocate up to 60 sage-grouse annually for the subsequent 3 years.

This EA outlines key background information procedures and effects of translocating up to 40 sage-grouse from Montana to Alberta. If this transplant is deemed successful, based on subsequent survival and reproductive success, then an EA proposing to transplant up to 60 additional sage-grouse annually for an additional three years will be prepared in the future. Based on minimum sage-grouse population estimates in Northern Montana, the proposed translocation would remove 0.26% (0.0026) of the sage-grouse population.